

SUPERS¹

By FREDERICK BOOTH

From The Seven Arts Magazine

WANTED: Tall, good-looking men for the stage. Must be well dressed. Apply at stage door of — Theater at ten A.M.

THERE is a certain amount of irony in the above, such as for instance, "Tall, good-looking"; "must be well dressed"; and the man who appears in the side street in the vicinity of the stage door at about half-past nine in the morning knows this, for he wrote the advertisement himself.

He is a thick man, with a red beard trimmed in the form of a blunt wedge, and cut away from around his mouth as a hedge is cut from a gate. He is a man with a cool green eye, immobile face, and distant manner. A man who walks slowly, is introspective, gloomy; who carries a big stick like Javert's cudgel and studies the pavement like a man of large affairs. He has the manner of a general waiting to review his army, which he expects to find decimated and run down at the heel. He wears a derby hat slightly broken at the crown, a little shiny on the edges; an overcoat with a collar somewhat frayed; boots that are rather square-toed and vulgar.

This combination of shabbiness and thoughtfulness lends him an appearance of sorrow — simple and primitive in the light of his red beard — as if he were telling himself and would like to tell the world: Here is a

¹ Copyright, 1916, by The Seven Arts Publishing Co., Inc. Copyright, 1917, by Frederick Booth.

man of immense capabilities, fated to deal in small and absolutely rotten potatoes.

In twos and threes some men begin to come in sight from the direction of Sixth and Seventh Avenues. They sidle into the street that runs by the stage door; some of them cast at Red Beard a look of recognition and a half-nod, to which he is profoundly indifferent. Others fix their gaze upon the legend over the door as children stare at the entrance of a circus tent.

Little by little the straggling and deliberate comers make a scattered crowd. The catchings of the advertisement agglomerate and blacken the middle of the street.

They stand stock still. As a concourse of men they are, all in all, voiceless and apathetic; before the momentary flurry of some traffic in the street they are brushed aside as dry leaves. There is a shuffling of feet on the asphalt as of dry leaves hurried along by the wind.

There seems to be an understanding among these men, as if this were not their first venture in such an enterprise. And there seems to be an understanding between them and the man with the cane: he appears, by the casual oblique glance, by the turned shoulder, to know them, where they came from, what he can do with them; and to feel the indifference of the dealer for his stock-in-trade. He wrote the ad. Here are the men. It is the same as ordering coal and seeing it dumped upon the sidewalk.

The scattered crowd had become a mob, a quiet mob that pushes gently, elbows itself without offence, waits.

Tall? Well-dressed? There are tall men, but their heads move in a sea of men that are short, men that are stooped. There may be well-dressed men, but they are hidden among men with shabby clothes. They are of all ages, but of the same condition. There may be seen gray heads, like patches of white wool in a flock of black sheep.

From a distance this small mass of humanity, held

in abeyance by a single purpose, appears to be wholly silent, its attention, if not its glance, controlled by the simple potency of the stage door; but coming closer one may hear sounds that are words gutturally spoken, and a desultory murmur that resolves itself into a dialogue of many parts. Is there any stratum of society that does not have its shop talk? In every one, its atoms, akin, are stretching back and forth those little tentacles of question and answer, of seeking to know, of seeking to tell, that hold them together.

"Wher' wus you last week?"

"T' Newark wit' Mantell."

"Any good?"

"Nix. Rotten. One night y' play an' th' next y' don't an' y' gotta . . ."

"How many do they want here?"

"I dunno, it's a rotten bizness; not'ing in this bizness no more. I'm goin' t' . . ."

"Hey, y' rummy, git offa my foot. Whaddaya t'ink I yam?"

A sinister sort of meekness controls these men; holds men patient who are hard of face; docile who seem to be cut for any sort of business; pathetically anxious who seem to be cast for any rough hazard.

These are the men who may be seen on park benches; at saloon corners; who accost passers in the name of charity; who carry restaurant signs; who may be seen every morning at newspaper offices eagerly scanning the want columns; who carry a newspaper as if it were something precious; who hurry along with a sidelong gait; whose shoes make a sliding noise on the pavement.

These are men unshaven of face, pallid of complexion. Some of them wear overcoats turned up at the collar, sagging at the skirt with a rag-tag of frayed lining showing; bulging at the pocket with some unimaginable personal freight. Some of them wear no overcoats, some no vests, others no collars. Some, with short, shrunken trousers, show bare red ankles. There are trousers that

have settled into fixed folds about the shoes as if they had not been doffed or pulled up for some nights. The feet point out at a loutish angle, or point in pigeonwise. There are flat feet, feet broken at the instep, spread out like a duck's — oozing damp, hideous and evidently filthy, stub-ended, low in the instep, too large. They shift, shuffle, and twist about like wounded and helpless members. The hands that go with them are red and dirty; they are rubbed against trousers impotently, for want of something better to do. These men stand with their necks habitually drawn into their collars, their shoulders hunched. They have an unhealthy color and they speak in voices coarsened by whiskey and by the weather. They crane at the door like beggars waiting for a handout.

It is ten o'clock. Red Beard has forsaken the sidewalk and is standing on a box or something at the stage door, looking at the findings of his advertisement. He scowls heavily and appears to be disgusted with what he sees.

The crowd edges closer. Those on the outside push those within. The crowd becomes a pack. Necks crane upward. A hoarse voice meant to be jocular wheezes:

"Hey, bo, y' want me, don't y's? Ain't I t' cheese?"

A laugh swells up, but dies instantly before the sardonic sneer under Red Beard's hedge. Someone says: "Huh, wot 'd'yu's t'ink you are, a primy donny star?"

Red Beard's jaw moves and he is heard to mutter:

"Gawd, what a rotten bunch!"

A uniform pushing and shoving begins. A clownish, uncouth eagerness manifests itself and animates the crowd. It is as if they were scrambling for apples. The scuffling of feet sounds like an unrhythmic dance. On the outside gaunt, bent legs push to get in. On the inside, in the middle of the jam, scrawny necks stretch up, heads stare.

A hoarse clacking murmur, resembling more than anything else the quacking of geese going to water, is evidence of a certain sort of talk going on within the

confines of the crowd. It runs in a monotone and reveals no anger, no impatience, none of the mob frenzy that might be expected here. A futile eagerness!

Already the man on the box has begun to exercise his authority. He holds in his hand a card which he consults with knitted brows, and from which his glance shoots quickly, like an accusation, at the men. He points at one man in the thick of the press.

"You there," he says, "you wop wit' t' dent in your nose, I want youse."

As the lucky one shoves forward the crowd is forced apart as logs are pried apart by a canthook.

"Youse guys stand back," bawls Red Beard. The stage door is opened by someone whose face shows through the dirty glass and the first super fights his way within.

Red Beard's club-like finger is periodically brandished at the pack; his voice of brass names some candidate by any ill-favored mark he can see, and that one is cut out as a steer is cut out of the herd.

It seems that some definite program is being followed: some planned chiaroscuro of the stage is being sketched in: broad shoulders and tall frames are at a premium, but shrunk figures, hairy faces and loutish manners are nailed by the Captain of this peculiar industry; old men with long beards have their innings.

The crowd imperceptibly draws together at the edges as the middle is gutted and the ill-hued flowers of the flock are plucked.

At last some at the outside begin to straggle from the press. They light cigarettes which hang like appendages from their lips; some of them whistle; some dance a tentative hop. Thus they make light of their bootless quest "for a job."

Suddenly the man on the box waves his hand and says: "That's all; youse guys come back here tomorry morn-ing," hops from his perch and disappears within the theater.

The largest number of those who came are still on the street. Collectively they present the appearance of a dog licking his chops after some morsel snatched away. They gape at the door closed in their faces as if someone had gone inside with something that belonged to them.

There is some hesitation, some loafing about, then a policeman bears down and waves his club. The black knot untangles itself, tailing out into a long string that drags its length in two directions, towards the two avenues, thins more, parts in the middle and disappears. No face shows more than passing disappointment — little has been lost. Some whistle, others call to each other, empty phrases are bandied about by tongues that have lost the gift of tongues.

The scuffling of their feet more or less in unison sounds like a rope dragging.